

Sun Citians crush habit to gain new lease on life

Peer support does it

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It took 52 years for one Sun City couple to quit smoking.

This past January, R.D. Mowry and his wife, Frances Leitch-Mowry smoked their last cigarette, but only after a lifetime of trying to kick the habit.

"It's the hardest thing to quit, Mowry said."It was a lifestyle - it gets to the point where your life revolves around when you can smoke a cigarette."

Leitch-Mowry agreed.

"When we started smoking, it was the thing to do, it was glamorous. Everybody smoked, so I did too."

The same British researchers who published the first study linking cigarette smoking to lung cancer have reported the most comprehensive results ever on the health effects of smoking. Based on a 50-year study of cigarette smoking, researchers found that a life of cigarette smoking will be, on average, 10 years shorter than a life with out it.

While the deadly effects of cigarette smoking have been proven, the new study, published last month in the British Medical Journal, is the first to evidence the damage over the lifetime of a generation. The effects were "much larger than had previously been suspected," the researchers reported.

Epidemiologist Richard Doll, who is now 91, and his team found that nearly half of all regular cigarette smokers were killed by their habit, and a quarter died before age 70. The study discovered that overcoming a cigarette habit also had dramatic effects. Someone who stops smoking by age 30 has the same average life expectancy as a non-smoker, and someone who stops at 50 will lose four, not 10, years of life.

Perhaps the idea of a shorter life span will motivate smokers to quit, however, tobacco use remains the leading preventable cause of death in the United States. It causes more than 440,000 deaths each year and resulting in an annual cost of more than \$75 billion in direct medical costs, according to the National Cancer Institute.

When she was diagnosed with Buerger's disease, Leitch-Mowry's doctor threatened her as motivation to quit smoking.

"He told me he'd cut off my legs if I didn't quit," she said. The doctor wasn't kidding. Smoking aggravated her condition and her prognosis wasn't looking good.

Buerger's disease is characterized by a combination of acute inflammation and clotting of the arteries and veins in the hands and feet. The obstruction of blood vessels in the hands and feet reduces the availability of blood to tissues, causes pain and eventually damages or destroys the tissue. People over the age of 50 who smoke or chew tobacco



run a greater risk of developing Buerger's disease, according to the University of Michigan's Health System.

Leitch-Mowry was scared into quitting, so she and her husband sought support through the Maricopa County Tobacco Use Prevention Program's group sessions at the Sun Health Community Education and Wellness Center in Sun City.

MACTUPP Cessation Specialist Victoria Glod facilitates the adult support group which is composed of fewer than a dozen smoking addicts or former addicts who need continued help. Similar MACTUPP-sponsored groups meet all over the county.

Glod said members who have overcome their addiction, such as Mowry and Leitch-Mowry, inspire their fellow group members.

"People need time to process and discuss what's going on with them," she said, emphasizing the importance of peer counseling.

"We talk about the addiction and the psychological aspect that says, 'This is my quick fix whenever I don't like the way I feel,'" Glod said. "We discuss health, lifestyle management, nutrition and weight management."

There are tools for people trying to quit and nicotine replacement therapies that work for some, like nicotine patches, lozenges and gum. Even deep breathing and stress-balls designed to keep hands distracted from wanting to hold a cigarette have proven successful in beating cravings. For Mowry and Leitch-Mowry, the peer support did the trick.

"It's helped us both and has kept us accountable," Mowry said. "I was never a believer in the group thing, but it really works."

His wife draws from the positive reinforcement the group provides.

"There are stressful weeks when you want a smoke," Leitch-Mowry said. "But when we can come to the group and say we didn't slip, we can be proud of that."

The couple can also proudly say they've potentially won back years of their life.

According to Doll's research team, a person who stops smoking at 60 will have a life expectancy three years longer than someone who continues; a 40-year-old will have a life expectancy nine years longer; and a 30-year-old will have a life expectancy no different from that of a nonsmoker.

Dr. Gautam Shah with the Clinic for Chest Diseases, based in Sun City and Sun City West, said the hazards of smoking far outweigh the buzz of a cigarette.

"People who smoke get a variety of diseases, most common, are bronchitis, chronic obstructive lung disease and emphysema," Shah said. "Most of the time, it's directly proportional to the amount of smoking they've done. The earlier you quit, the better off you are."

Continuing to smoke will only create problems or aggravate existing conditions, he said.

"You can't cure emphysema, but you can make it worse by smoking. You are adding fuel to the fire if you continue to smoke," Shah said. "By quitting, you improve the functioning of the lungs and keep toxins from going into the lungs."

The doctor suggested that quitting cold-turkey, just throwing cigarettes away and never looking back, is the best strategy.

"The important thing is that they have to make up their minds to quit," he said, adding that support of family and friends is also key. "Quitting makes an impact on quality of life and what they do with the rest of the years left in life. It's not ever too late to quit smoking."